

Guatemalan President Dashes Backers' Hopes

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GUATEMALA CITY—There are those who call Guatemala's grandiose presidential palace "the enchanted house."

"That is because of how people change once they enter it, not because it is haunted," said political analyst Miguel Balcarcel.

Few have fallen under the spell more completely than the incumbent, at least in the eyes of those who initially were the most ardent supporters of President Ramiro de Leon Carpio. After all, he rose to prominence as the governmental human rights ombudsman, with a reputation for speaking out against military abuses.

De Leon assumed the presidency almost two years ago in the midst of a political crisis after being hailed as the only person who could govern the troubled nation. But not much changed. Not a single prominent human rights case has moved forward, not even the murder of the president's first cousin and close friend, Jorge Carpio. The military has seen little of its power go back to civilian hands. And the shaky economy is not looking up.

The disillusionment is especially strong among those who were most eager to see de Leon take office, the human rights activists who felt that with a man of his vocation in office, Guatemala had a chance to end the military domination that has plagued it for generations.

"I thought I was witnessing history, something great, when he took office," said a veteran human rights worker, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals. "He had a great opportunity to do great things, and he settled for being a transition figure. History will condemn him for that for our eternal memory."

While most Central American countries have faced difficulties in reducing the role of the military, Guatemala has made less progress than the rest, and the disappointment in de Leon is only the latest in a series of failed champions of civilian rule.

Vinicio Cerezo, a Christian Demo-

crat who had endured years of exile and death threats from the military, won one of the few free elections in decades in 1986, pledging to bring the military under control or lose the presidency trying. He ended his term as the butt of jokes over his open womanizing and his failure to rein in the military's power or curb human rights abuses.

Jorge Serrano followed in 1991, winning the elections and seeming to promise a continuation of at least the formal democratic process. But in May 1993 he and part of the military tried to seize near-dictatorial power, precipitating the crisis that led to the Congress electing de Leon.

These failures of civilian governments to exercise effective control on the military, along with the dearth of effective civilian leadership, have led to widespread disillusionment in the democratic process and institutions in this nation of 10 million people.

President de Leon startled both diplomats and local authorities last month after Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) linked a Guatemalan colonel, who had been on the CIA payroll, to the killings of a U.S. citizen, innkeeper Michael DeVine, and a leftist guerrilla commander whose wife is an American lawyer. Instead of promising an investigation or using the newfound leverage to take on the army, de Leon urged the colonel, Julio Alpirez, to sue Torricelli for his comments.

"De Leon is totally a lame duck," said Frank LaRue of the Center for Human Rights Legal Action, a human rights organization. "He will end up as one of the most despised presidents in our history. He failed all expectations. He stands for nothing."

The president's office did not return numerous telephone calls, but de Leon, in a press conference last week, acknowledged the discontent. "My image has suffered, as does every president's while they are in office," de Leon said. "It is no different than in any other country." His term runs through the end of next year.

Part of the president's limitation, said politicians who know him, is that he has no political party to rely on for support in Congress, and, because he

was chosen by Congress, not a popular election, he views his job as finishing out the presidential period, not taking bold initiatives.

In addition to disappointing human rights workers and their international supporters, de Leon has proposed and withdrawn economic programs that have created the impression that he is unable to stick to a decision once he makes it.

Political analyst Balcarcel and others recalled that in the beginning, de Leon would not sleep in the palace and eschewed the trappings of power. But within months, all that vanished.

"It is the mystique of the office, it is being surrounded by people that say yes to everything you say, it is being in a different world," Balcarcel said.

Diplomats and human rights activists offered two other factors to explain the inability of civilians to wield power:

■ Virtually all the levers of power are in the hands of generals, who can

still dispose of presidents if they wish.

■ The leadership ranks of an entire generation of civilian leaders were decimated in Guatemala's war against Marxist insurgents.

For most of the last 34 years, anyone who spoke up against the military was likely to be viewed as an enemy, branded a Marxist and driven into exile or executed. Human rights groups estimate that more than 100,000 people have been killed, many in this manner.

Political analysts, human rights workers and diplomats said the current, growing disenchantment could jeopardize Guatemala's democratic future because of the growing cynicism about the leaders.